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BEST OF CHICAGO

Best northwest-side local landmark and lore

Schiller Woods magic water pump

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Filling up at Chicago's "fountain of youth" in Schiller Woods
Credit: Kirk Williamson

Quench your thirst for community at Chicago's most famous public water pump. Day or night, there is almost always a line of aqua-curious folks at "Chicago's fountain of youth" on Irving Park in Schiller Woods. The outsize mythology of this peculiar pump on the city's fringes makes it a destination for locals and tourists alike, who queue up politely with watercooler jugs and various other large vessels.

Cook County Forest Preserve maintenance supervisor Len Dufkis told WBEZ in 2014 that the pump was installed in 1945, and its popularity hasn't waned since. "It comes from an underground aquifer. Mother Nature. From the ground. Obviously, if you're drafting city water, you're going to have chemicals in there from the Chicago water treatment plant. This does not contain any type of chlorine, or any of the other chemicals found." The fountain pours well water/groundwater (interchangeable terms) and is one of 212 city water pumps, but this one is by far the most popular—requiring repair at least ten times a year.

Misinformation and legend around the site abound. Local lore includes unsubstantiated claims of a visit from Pope John Paul II in 1979, as well as magic powers bestowed by the pump's water. Other fables claim the water has medicinal qualities, that drinking from it imbues one with magical powers including immortality, and (my personal favorite) that the pump has a nearby cursed counterpart—infused with evil. North Center brewery Hop Butcher for the World used the wondrous water to make a beer in 2024 called Regeneration Station. Al Scorch, beloved musician and oral historian who was born and raised in the adjacent neighborhood of Dunning, told me in an interview that the water is "marvelous, mineral-rich, the perfect beverage to slake your thirst after tromping through buckthorn overgrowth all day!"

To maximize your enjoyment on a northwest-side excursion, unearth your Nalgene (this endeavor is far too blue-collar for a Stanley cup), grab a hotdog at Gene and Jude's, and park in the adjoining model airplane lot. Enjoy the company of neighbors at this old-school community gathering site while you wait to fill your flask at the famous fount, then take a stroll along the Des Plaines River Trail. I can't guarantee immortality, but you'll almost certainly meet some northwest-side eccentrics whose cups runneth over with watercooler gossip and Chicago history.

Schiller Woods-East
W. Irving Park, west of N. Cumberland